Crows Landing River Ranch Restoration Project

Initial Study/Negative Declaration

May 3, 2021

Lead Agency:
Reclamation District 2092
121 W. Main St., Suite H
Turlock, California 95380
(209) 872-3744

Project Information

1. **Project title:** Crows Landing River Ranch Restoration Project

2. **Lead agency name and address:** Reclamation District 2092
   3559 Shiloh Road
   Modesto, CA 95358

3. **Contact person and phone number:** Maggie Blankinship, 209-872-3744

4. **Project location:** Adjacent to the San Joaquin River at 12457 South Carpenter Road, Crows Landing, CA

5. **Project sponsor's name and address:** River Partners
   Attn: Emily Mullins, San Joaquin Valley Ecologist
   580 Vallombrosa Avenue, Chico, CA 95926

6. **General plan designation:** Ag-40

7. **Zoning:** "A-2-40" Agricultural Lands minimum parcel size 40 acres. River Partners purchased this land with funding from 3 different sources in 2018: the Disney Conservation Foundation, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) in collaboration with Reclamation District 2092

8. **Description of project:**

This Project aims to restore ecological processes and native riparian vegetation on approximately 195 acres of agricultural fields along the San Joaquin River. The primary goal of the Project is to improve connectivity and habitat quality for anadromous fish and other sensitive species. This will be achieved through improved floodplain inundation, frequency, and residence time; improved stream quality and habitat productivity; increased cool water refugia and improved food web productivity to benefit fish and other riparian-dependent wildlife. Project work will establish native vegetation, modify an existing farmer berm to reconnect historic floodplains and allow natural river process, and grade a swale to maintain flood conveyance and minimize fish entrapment risks. Reconnection of this acreage to the San Joaquin River will allow flooding for habitat benefits and transient floodwater storage. Native vegetation will be established using standard agricultural techniques including site preparation, drip and furrow irrigation, as well as chemical and mechanical weed control

9. **Surrounding land uses and setting:**
   The Project is located 4.5 miles northeast of Crow's Landing, California – a regional center with a population of approximately 350. The Project is also 9 miles southeast of Patterson, California, a rapidly growing community with population (2010 census) of 20,000. Regionally, approximately twelve percent of the population lives below the poverty level and seasonal unemployment can exceed 20% due to the fluctuating nature of agricultural jobs. All our neighbors are farmers, comprising fulltime farming operations centered on the production of almonds, walnuts, cherries, alfalfa, and irrigated field/row/truck crops. Livestock operations around the farm are limited to moderate sized dairies. In terms of public parks and outdoor recreational facilities this area has been identified as one of the most underserved communities in California.

10. **Other public agencies whose approval is required:**

    California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Section 1600 Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement), Central Valley Flood Protection Board (Encroachment Permit)

11. **Have California Native American tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated with the project area requested consultation pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.3.1? If so, is there a plan for consultation that includes, for example, the determination of significance of impacts to tribal cultural resources, procedures regarding confidentiality, etc.?**

    Tribes identified by the NAHC were notified of the project in a timely manner. No Tribes have yet requested consultation.

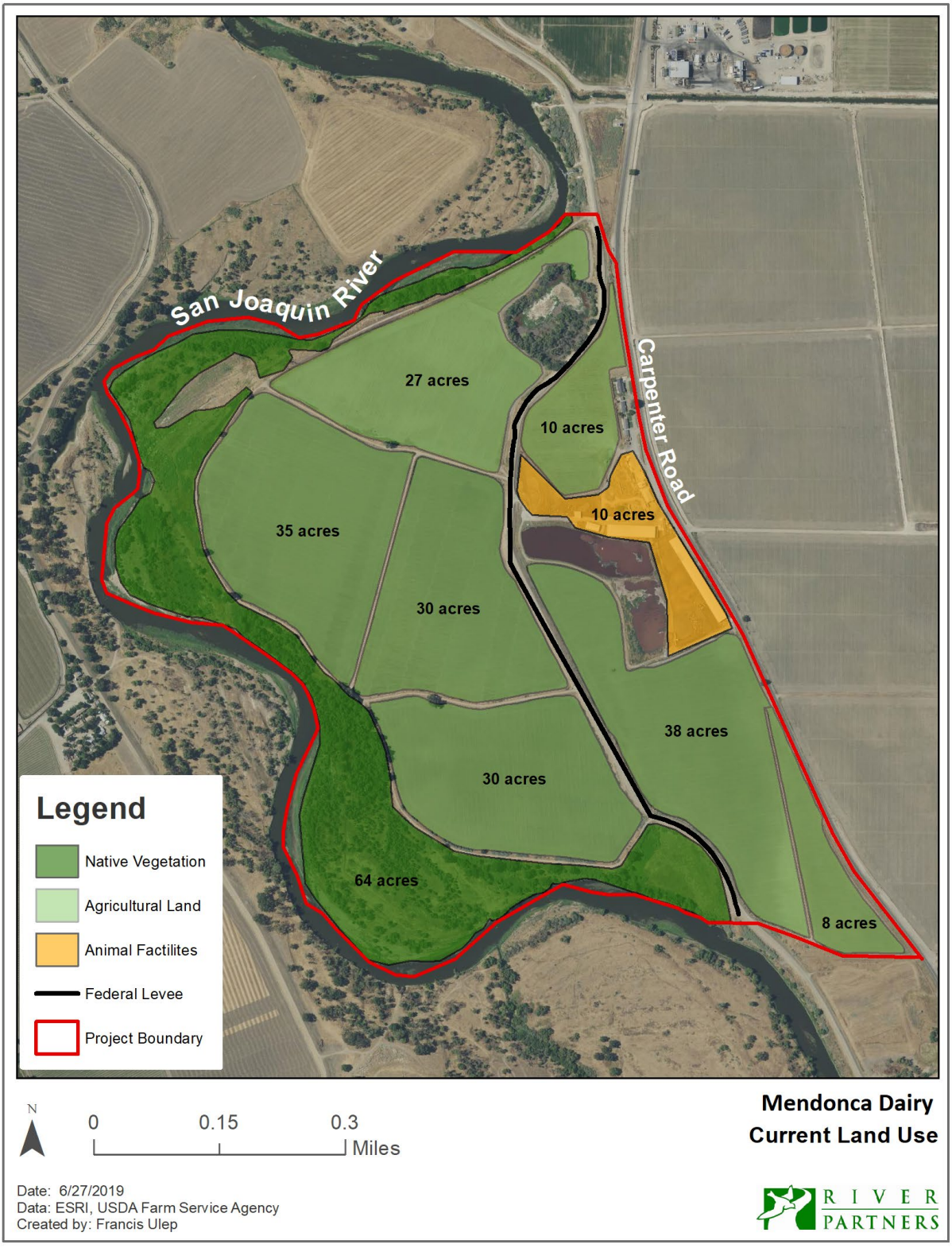

Figure 1. Project Detail Map provides overview of project site and the types of land use that will be evaluated throughout the site assessment and plan drafting stages.

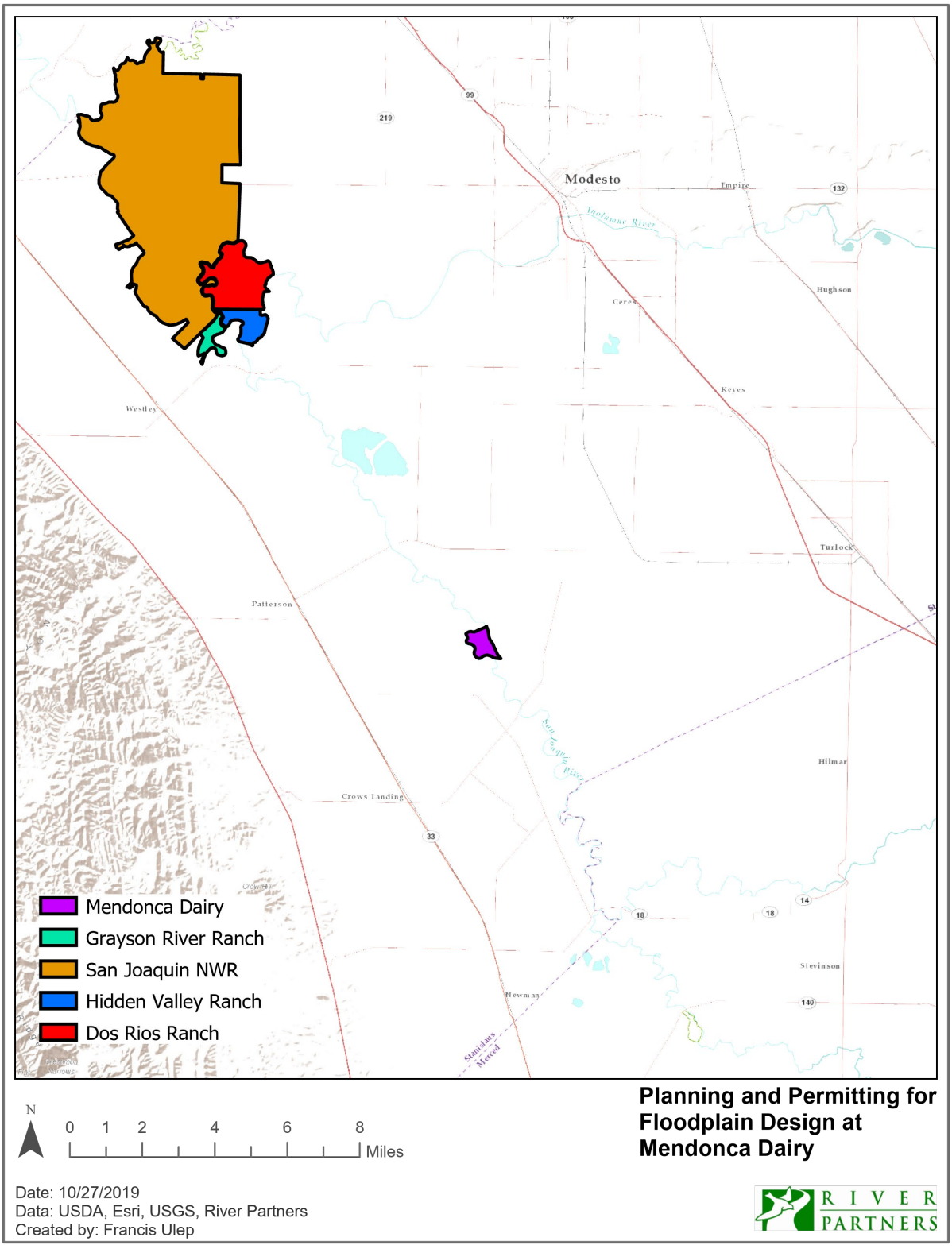

Figure 2. Regional Vicinity Map identifies Mendonca Dairy in relation to other significant regional restoration efforts undertaken by the USFWS, River Partners and Reclamation District 2092. This project will have the benefit of undertaking expansion between the Merced and Tuolumne Confluences.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS POTENTIALLY AFFECTED:

The environmental factors checked below would be potentially affected by this project, involving at least one impact that is a "Potentially Significant Impact" as indicated by the checklist on the following pages.

- □ **Aesthetics**
- □ **Agriculture Resources**
- □ **Air Quality**
- □ **Biological Resources**
- □ **Cultural Resources**
- □ **Geology/Soils**
- □ **Hazards & Hazardous Materials**
- □ **Hydrology/Water Quality**
- □ **Land Use/Planning**
- □ **Mandatory Findings of Significance**
- □ **Mineral Resources**
- □ **Noise**
- □ **Population/Housing**
- □ **Public Services**
- □ **Recreation**
- □ **Transportation/Traffic**
- □ **Utilities/Service Systems**

DETERMINATION: (To be completed by the Lead Agency)

On the basis of this initial evaluation:

X I find that the proposed project COULD NOT have a significant effect on the environment, and a NEGATIVE DECLARATION will be prepared.

□ I find that although the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment, there will not be a significant effect in this case because revisions in the project have been made by or agreed to by the project proponent. A MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION will be prepared.

□ I find that the proposed project MAY have a significant effect on the environment, and an ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT is required.

□ I find that the proposed project MAY have a "potentially significant impact" or "potentially significant unless mitigated" impact on the environment, but at least one effect 1) has been adequately analyzed in an earlier document pursuant to applicable legal standards, and 2) has been addressed by mitigation measures based on the earlier analysis as described on attached sheets. An ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT is required, but it must analyze only the effects that remain to be addressed.

□ I find that although the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment, because all potentially significant effects (a) have been analyzed adequately in an earlier EIR or NEGATIVE DECLARATION pursuant to applicable standards, and (b) have been avoided or mitigated pursuant to that earlier EIR or NEGATIVE DECLARATION, including revisions or mitigation measures that are imposed upon the proposed project, nothing further is required.

Maggie Blankinship	5/3/2021
Signature	**Date**
Maggie Blankinship, Secretary	**RD 2092**
Printed Name	**For**

CEQA INITIAL STUDY CHECKLIST COMMENTS

Crows Landing River Ranch Restoration

I. Aesthetics

The project will establish a riparian forest on land that is currently in use for agriculture, this will have no negative impact on the aesthetics of the land and will improve the visual character of the area. There are no rock outcroppings, historic buildings, or scenic highways on or near the project area. All existing trees will be conserved and avoided during project activities. The project will not add any additional light sources that will affect the day or nighttime views in the area.

II. Agricultural and Forestry Resources

The project will not impact agricultural and forestry resources. The property is enrolled in the Williamson Act and restoration activities will not conflict with the open space designation allowable under the Williamson Act.

III. Air Quality

Project activities will not conflict with or obstruct air quality plans or standards. There will be a short-term increase in diesel fuel exhaust at the onset of project activities related to earth moving. These activities will last for less than one-month, further analysis is needed to assess the total emission that will result from these activities which is part of an ongoing study by the project proponent, River Partners. Following earth moving, all other activities relating to this project will be performed using standard agricultural practices already in use on this property and those nearby. In the long-term this project will contribute to an overall improvement in air quality. This improvement will be achieved through the cessation of emissions caused by agricultural activities. It has been determined by the San Joaquin Air Pollution Board that open space and wildlife habitat uses require no air quality permitting.

IV. Biological Resources

Increased connectivity of the floodplain to the river could result in impacts to the movement of native migratory fishes. A swale to ensure positive drainage within the site will be constructed to mitigate this potential impact. There should be no additional impacts to the biological resources within the project area. This project is designed to enhance habitat for sensitive species by re-establishing native structurally diverse vegetation communities. This project will result in greater acreage of suitable habitat for riparian wildlife, including sensitive species such as the riparian brush rabbit, riparian woodrat, giant garter snake, Central Valley steelhead and green sturgeon. All of which would benefit from increased habitat protection and restoration. Best management practices will be followed to protect all sensitive species that could be found on site (Table 1).

Table 1.

Species	Nearest Occurrence	Data Source	Potential Habitat On-Site	Potential Impact	Best Management Practices
Swainson's Hawk	San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County	eBird	High: SWHA forage in grasslands and agricultural fields here. Dispersed trees near foraging habitat serve as hunting perches and nesting structures for SWHA. Nesting habitat on-site may include stands of a large oak, willow, and cottonwood trees along the San Joaquin River channel. This species is frequently seen soaring during the spring and summer months and are known to nest across the Central Valley and near the project.	Somewhat likely	No ground-disturbing activities will occur during the nesting season. Project biologists will conduct pre-construction surveys for SWHA per the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (2000). If active nest(s) are detected, work will stop until fledged or failed nest is confirmed. Project impact is somewhat likely but would not intentional. Nesting habitat could be impacted during berm removal, however, tree damage would be minor. The project will create additional nesting and foraging habitat for SWHA within 3 years.
Tricolored Blackbird	San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County	eBird	Moderate: TRBL prefers to nest in wetlands within cattails or tule marsh stands. Because of declines in wetlands within the species' range, they recently tend to nest in farm fields (rice, alfalfa, pasture, etc.). The San Joaquin River is adjacent to the west boundary of the project which sustains aquatic vegetation.	Somewhat likely	Project biologists will survey for TRBL throughout the year. If breeding activity is detected, create a buffer zone of approximately 300 feet between ground-disturbing activities and any active breeding colony. Defer all drone monitoring if active nest(s) are detected. Earthwork is not anticipated to begin during the nesting season, as to not disturb a potential breeding colony. Project fields will be kept bare after once the last harvest is complete. New vegetation growth will be controlled by disking or herbicide applications until the restoration plants are ready to be installed.
Giant Garter Snake	Merced County	CNDDB	Low: WPT prefers slow-moving, deep pooling water with either rocky or muddy bottoms. Exposed banks, logs, and rocks are preferred	None	Project biologists will conduct a pre-construction survey to determine whether GGS are on site, including flagging potential burrows and creating a 50ft buffer around

			basking areas next to the body of water. The project focuses on the existing agricultural fields, where WPT would be extremely unlikely to inhabit.		them. Visual surveys will be repeated if activities halt for more than two weeks. If GGS is found, all work will cease until CDFW is notified and approves a notice to proceed.
Western Pond Turtle	Salida, Stanislaus County	iNaturalist	Low: WPT prefers slow-moving, deep pooling water with either rocky or muddy bottoms. Exposed banks, logs, and rocks are preferred basking areas next to the body of water. The project focuses on the existing agricultural fields, where WPT would be extremely unlikely to inhabit.	None	Project biologists will conduct a pre-construction survey for WPT and nests (March-August). Nest surveys will happen periodically throughout the nesting season if WPT is observed on site. All nest sites would be mapped and made aware to project staff. Work would cease if the nest site(s) falls within the project area until a hatched or failed nest is confirmed.
Species	**Nearest Occurrence**	**Data Source**	**Potential Habitat On-Site**	**Potential Impact**	**Best Management Practices**
White-tailed Kite	San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County	eBird	High: WTKI prefers open areas with adequate perches for hunting. Nesting habitat on-site may include stands of trees along the San Joaquin River channel and bordering the existing agricultural fields	None	Project biologists will conduct a pre-construction survey for WTKI per the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (2000). If active nest(s) are detected, earthwork will stop until confirmed fledging or failed nest(s). Earthwork within the project boundary is not anticipated during the nesting season to minimize disturbance of WTKI.
Golden Eagle	San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County	eBird	Low: GOEA prefers large, open landscapes for foraging and often nest on cliffs or tall trees of foothill and montane elevations. The project site is located approximately 30-40 feet in elevation. There are mature cottonwoods and some oaks along the San Joaquin River channel The project focuses on the existing	None	Project biologists will conduct a pre-construction survey for GOEA per the USFWS Interim Golden Eagle Inventory and Monitoring Protocols (2010). Avoid ground-disturbing activities if nest(s) are detected and only resume once fledged or failed nest is confirmed. Earthwork is not anticipated during the nesting season.

			agricultural fields, where GOEA would be extremely unlikely to inhabit.		
Bald Eagle	San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County	eBird	Low: BAEA tends to nest in substantial conifers, close to large fishable waters such as rivers, lakes, wetlands, or the coast. The remnant vegetation contains stands of tall cottonwoods and oak may provide the necessary cover requirements and fishing for wintering BAEA. Breeding eagles favor higher elevation woodlands with large hardwood trees to support their increasing nest size from year to year. BAEA tend to avoid areas of frequent human activity for nesting. The project site is frequently disturbed by the present agricultural activities and likely would deter eagles during the breeding season.	None	Project biologists will conduct a pre-construction survey for BAEA per the CDFW Bald Eagle Breeding Survey Instructions (2010). Avoid ground-disturbing activities if nest(s) are detected and only resume once fledged or failed nest is confirmed. The project is not anticipated to begin during the nesting season.

V. Cultural Resources

A literature search for historic or cultural resources has resulted in no known records. In addition, the USFWS performed an Environmental Assessment to examine impacts from the proposed expansion of the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge. It was determined that the expansion would not have an effect on cultural resources. The preferred alternative of this expansion would restore riparian habitat on up 16,561 acres along the San Joaquin River. This project is fully within the proposed expansion boundaries and the activities proposed are consistent with those outlined by USFWS. The tribes of the San Joaquin Valley have been contacted regarding the project and have returned no known records for the property. An archeological monitor will be present during earth moving activities. Avoidance protocols are in place to halt work immediately if any previously unrecorded cultural resources were discovered during this action, all project-related activities would cease immediately, and the consultation process outlined in Section 800.13 of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's regulations (36 CFR 800) would be initiated. Energy
This Project will not require the use of energy resources beyond what is required in site preparation and what is necessary to transport plants, materials, and labor to the project site. This project does not conflict with local renewable energy plans.

VI. Geology and Soils

The project involves only minor land grading and leveling, and vegetation management to establish native plant communities. The conversion of cultivated farmland to native vegetation will promote soil conservation as there will be reductions in soil erosion, decreased sedimentation of waterways, increased organic input and decreased cultural runoff following the completion of restoration. Soil analysis has shown that the soils underlying stratification are sufficient to support the project as designed.

VII. Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The project will not generate greenhouse gas emissions in excess of the benefit which they provide through planting of tens of thousands of native plants. Greenhouse gas emissions will be comparable to the current land use on this property with the exception of the 2-3 weeks during which earth moving activities will be underway. Active management will cease following plant establishment, resulting in a regional reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. This project will result in a net benefit to greenhouse gas emissions regionally through carbon sequestration, which was estimated using the CREEC tool to be approximately 1,000Mg of carbon in the first 50 years, reduced emissions resulting from the cessation of agricultural activities.

VIII. Hazards and Hazardous Materials

The project includes the use of herbicides to control undesirable vegetation. Such herbicide application will be performed according to label instructions and in collaboration with the Agricultural Commissioners of Stanislaus County.

IX. Hydrology and Water Quality

There will be no negative impacts to water quality resulting from the project. The Project activities will result in benefits to water quality will include reduced soil erosion, reduced farm chemical

runoff, nutrient retention. This project will not decrease groundwater or interfere with recharge, increased flooding on the property resulting from the restoration actions could increase groundwater recharge. The existing drainage pattern of the site will be minimally altered. The site will be graded to ensure positive drainage from the fields into the San Joaquin River. This will not result in substantial changes to erosion or surface runoff. To prevent this the site will not be reconnected to the river until vegetation is established. MBK Engineers will performe a hydrologic impact analysis of the site with the proposed project plan. A . Finalized model outputs will be provided for permitting.

X. Land Use and Planning

There will be no impacts to land use or planning resulting from the project.

XI. Mineral Resources

The project will not alter mineral resources on the site.

XII. Noise

a. The project may result in a temporary increase in noise as the result of earthwork, hand-held landscaping tools, and vehicles. Project activities that generate noise will take place exclusively during daylight hours and are not anticipated to exceed decibel levels associated with routine landscaping.

XIII. Population and Housing

The project will re-establish native vegetation on previously degraded lands. There will not be a significant impact to the region's population or housing resulting from the project, however there are currently 4 single family residences on the property for which the project proponent maintains the lease for. Residents will be notified 60 days in advance of restoration activity.

XIV. Public Services

The project will not result in the need for additional public services.

XV. Recreation

The project will establish native vegetation communities and will not increase the use of existing neighborhood or regional parks. There will be no construction or expansion of recreation facilities eliminating adverse physical impacts to the environment resulting from such construction or expansion.

XVI. Transportation

This project will not impact transportation and will not alter or impact any intersections or existing roads, contribute to increased traffic in the area or impede emergency access.

XVII. Tribal Cultural Resources

Literature search for historic or cultural resources has resulted in no known records. The tribes of the San Joaquin Valley have been contacted regarding the project and have returned no known records for the property. An archeological monitor will be present during earth moving activities. Avoidance

protocols are in place to halt work immediately and consult with appropriate authorities should such resources be found.

XVIII. Utilities and Service Systems

The project will not require new or expanded utilities and will have no influence on wastewater treatment facilities. The project will have sufficient water supplies to be able to complete the project as designed and upon completion, will no longer require water use to maintain.

XIX. Wildfire

This project will install native vegetation that will not necessitate installation of new emergency response infrastructure nor threaten local communities with enhanced risk of wildfire or exposure to pollutant concentrations resultant from wildfire.

XX. Mandatory Findings of Significance

The project will not degrade habitat for fish an wildlife species or negatively impact endangered or important species. There are no cumulatively considerable impacts that will result from the current project or future projects. The project will not adversely impact the environment or human beings.

References

"Carbon Sequestration | CREEC." Accessed April 21, 2021. https://creec.conservation.ca.gov/app/estimator.

"Proposed Expansion San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan," n.d., 130.